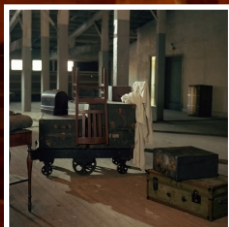


On display in the SAMHSA Waiting and Historical Rooms, First Floor

The Lives They Left Behind Suitcases from a State Hospital Attic



September 1 – 27, 2006

8:30 a.m. – 5:00 p.m.

www.suitcaseexhibit.org

The Willard Suitcases

When Willard Psychiatric Center in New York's Finger Lakes closed in 1995, workers discovered hundreds of suitcases in the attic of an abandoned building. Many of them appeared untouched since their owners packed them decades earlier before entering the institution.

The suitcases and their contents bear witness to the rich, complex lives their owners lived prior to being committed to Willard. They speak about aspirations, accomplishments, community connections, but also about loss and isolation. From the clothing and personal objects left behind, we can gain some understanding of who these people were before they disappeared behind hospital walls. We can picture their jobs and careers, see them driving cars, playing sports, studying, writing, and traveling the world. We can imagine their families and friends. But we can also see their lives coming apart due to unemployment, the death of a loved one, loneliness, poverty, or some other catastrophic event.

The suitcases and the life stories of the people who owned them raise questions that are difficult to confront. Why were these people committed to this institution, and why did so many stay for so long? How were they treated? What was it like to spend years in a mental institution, shut away from a society that wanted to distance itself from people it considered insane? Why did most of these suitcase owners live out their days at Willard? What about their friends and families? Are the circumstances today any better than they were for psychiatric patients during the first half of the 20th century?